

The Faded Dream

Peace Corps Droops
As Volunteers Fall

First of a Series
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Washington — Nine years after its creation by President John F. Kennedy, the Peace Corps has become a jaded dream.

It pretends to be as vigorous as ever. It will spend nearly \$100 million this year and will maintain about 9,500 volunteers in about 58 countries — give or take one or two, depending on who gets friendly or angry with the United States.

But the number of volunteers has diminished steadily in the last three years. Applications to join have fallen about 50 percent. Smaller and smaller contingents are being requested by host countries.

Once, the idea of a Peace Corps inspired much of the world.

One thought of the cream of young America, carrying shining ideals, skills and diligence into far-off jungles at great sacrifice and risk, then returning home after a couple of years with a tremendous sense of accomplishment and a deep understanding of humanity.

One gazed down the Peace Corps road and saw eternal brotherhood and everlasting peace in a world of plenty for all.

But after nine years, in which nearly 50,000 Americans have been sent abroad at a cost of \$750 million, the Peace Corps dream seems more elusive than ever.

Vietnam at Core

Like many of the countries in which it has worked, the corps has undergone considerable upheaval in the last nine years. At the core of it is the Vietnam war.

Surveys have shown that the youth who wants to join the Peace Corps is also very likely to oppose the war. At least three in ten are said to feel moved to do something about it.

For the Peace Corps, this spells trouble. The agency officially recognizes the right to dissent. But it hasn't found a way to allow freedom of expression without upsetting host governments and sending tremors through the more-orthodox organs of U.S. foreign policy.

Closing Down

The Peace Corps has already been embarrassed by politically active volunteers in Turkey, Chile, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Liberia, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Ecuador and Colombia. If the trend continues, the eventual solution may be to close down programs — which many volunteers think would be a good idea.

Many current volunteers freely admit that the only reason they are in the corps is that draft boards usually will defer them until they return from overseas. Many say the only reason they haven't been active in antiwar protests overseas is that they don't want to risk being shipped home early and dismissed.

Lost Its Zip

The Nixon Administration insists, however, that realism and modernization can make the Peace Corps as vital as ever. The current emphasis is on greater efficiency, greater technical skills and a more-balanced mix of Americans taking part.

The fact is, though, that the Peace Corps seems helplessly and hopelessly to have lost its zip. In both the Washington headquarters and the crumbling villages of India, Lesotho and Brazil, it is steadily losing the idealists — the very sort of people whom it needs the most.

It has demonstrated little appeal for Middle America, upon whom it is counting so it can remain alive.

In the opinion of Joseph H. Blatchford, the agency's 35-year-old director, the Peace Corps "is probably more important today than when it was founded." He cites a "cynical fog of malaise" that he says has descended on the United States.

"Many Americans are disenchanted with foreign commitments of all sorts," Blatchford says. "Many are disenchanted with government. In Middle America, there's a tendency to recoil into isolationism."

Beyond the Campus

But the Peace Corps, he feels, has built enormous good will and can continue to have widespread appeal if its recruiters look beyond the tormented campuses and convince blue collar and aging and black

Americans that they are wanted.

He feels that overseas projects must be tailored to specific needs of specific countries and that recruiting must be tailored to meet them.

"In recruiting we are no longer stressing what we used to call the mud hut type of life," said Philip W. Steitz, who Blatchford hired as director of the office of volunteer placement. "We're not asking for people to come in and put on a big hair shirt to wear overseas for the sake of self-sacrifice."

"We don't think that's the object of the Peace Corps. We're not a finishing school for people with guilt complexes."

New Directions

Amid fanfare at his headquarters a block from the White House, Blatchford announced in late September a set of 12 so-called "new directions."

Recent liberal arts graduates would still be welcome, he said, but they would be better trained. Stronger efforts would be made to absorb them into mainstream America upon their return.

Arrangements would be made, with labor unions and big business to lend skilled workers to the Peace Corps in mid-career without jeopardizing their incomes and seniority. For the first time, a few married men with nonworking wives and children would be sent abroad.

Not Working

In a "reverse peace corps," foreigners with special talents would be brought to the United States. The main corps, meanwhile, would become increasingly binational in activities and staff and would seek ways to work with multinational organizations.

Today, five months later, indications are that the new directions won't work. Peace Corps officials insist that it's too soon to make a definite judgment. They contend that spring and summer plans are progressing well.

But several highly touted projects are going begging. Others have been postponed or are not attracting the sort of volunteers they were designed for. Still others are being implemented only at relatively great expense.

Take the reverse peace corps. The State Department's educational and cultural exchange division transferred to the Peace Corps a \$100,000-a-year program under which about 65 qualified foreigners have taught their languages and cultures in

Philadelphia.

But Rep. Wayne L. Hays (D-Ohio) interpreted the switch as an attempt to put something over on Congress. Suspecting there might be something subversive about exposing American youngsters to foreigners, Hays had the program eliminated.

Aims to Convert

Commented C. Payne Lucas, to whose Peace Corps division the program had been assigned:

"Who is more qualified to teach black history than a teacher from Ghana? . . . One of my goals this year is to convert Hays and Rooney (Rep. John J. Rooney (D-NY), a penny-tight member of the House Appropriations Committee.)"

In speech after speech since he took office last May, Blatchford has insisted that the call from abroad is for more Americans trained in vocational education, general education, agriculture and business management than are now available.

"Everywhere," Blatchford said recently, "the cry was for men and women with higher priority skills — who can also work with people . . . I got the call on every level, from the remote school superintendent in the back woods to the prime minister of Iran and the emperor of Ethiopia."

Two-sided

Nearly nine years ago, R. Sargent Shriver, the first Peace Corps director, was saying the same thing.

The problem, however, has been two-sided. Not only has the Peace Corps never been able to fulfill its goals, but also, as Wayne Mock, the agency's research director, put it recently:

"No one ever said, 'Now look, what ARE our goals?'"

Instead, the corps was permitted to grow rapidly and haphazardly from a Presidential campaign idea.

Kennedy's "Lemon"

Mr. Kennedy first suggested a Peace Corps in a 2 A.M. campaign speech at the University of Michigan in October, 1960. It was almost an afterthought at the end of an exhausting day, but it made headlines. So he capitalized on it to win votes the next month.

According to Harris Wofford, one of Mr. Kennedy's first special assistants in the White

House, the President was lukewarm about actually establishing a Peace Corps. He called it his "lemon," Wofford recalled, and was pleasantly surprised when his exuberant brother-in-law Shriver made "lemonade" out of it.

Before Shriver resigned in 1965, the Peace Corps multiplied from 120 volunteers in three countries to 10,000 volunteers in 56 countries. Virtually wherever a government showed a willingness to have a contingent, the agency supplied one. If the corps couldn't get skilled workers, it sent the best it had — which often didn't mean much. And Congress readily appropriated the cash.

Willing

Like tens of millions of Americans, hundreds of millions of foreigners were enchanted by the Kennedy image. They sometimes seemed to forget that it takes more than an influx of youths with vigor and idealism to forge a sound economy.

Although many countries would have preferred technical specialists, they compromised. Many governments didn't know what they wanted or even needed. But if Washington held out a friendly hand and ample pocketbook, they were willing.

Those Americans who were available and willing, however, were almost exclusively the young college graduates. They were single, free, and willing and able to live on a shoestring and a \$75-a-month nestegg, banked for them in the United States.

In the early 60's, the Peace Corps seemed just the vehicle that they needed. In those days, as today, it was hardly the need of the blue-collar workers and blacks, who felt life was enough of a challenge at home.

Dizzy Race

The Peace Corps responded to what it could get and to its own dizzy race to expand. The young liberal arts grads were bright and adaptable. Thus, they seemed best suited for the English-teaching and community development projects that were often vaguely conceived but were easy to arrange on paper and could swallow volunteers wholesale.

Recalls Robert E. White, the present regional director for Latin America:

"In the early days, the Peace Corps staff, representative in a country would go to the minister of agriculture and say, 'Jose, how would you like 20 people for agricultural development?' Being a Latin, Jose would reply, 'I'd like it very much.' Then he, wouldn't think any more about it."

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"If the 80 would arrive and there wouldn't be anything for them to do. It was like a parachute drop. A volunteer would be told, Here's the bus that you take. Go and look around and get off where you think you can do some good."

Staff Report

The large numbers of unhappy and frustrated volunteers who have come out of Peace Corps community development programs, a 1968 staff report said, have probably had an adverse effect on volunteer recruiting.

Which isn't to say that there haven't been a lot of pluses about the Peace Corps. In Ethiopia alone, as Wofford notes, the first contingent of volunteers doubled the number of high school teachers, nearly doubled the number of high school students and helped to develop a major university.

"The Peace Corps has measurably stepped up the pressure for change in Ethiopia," Wofford said, "including pressure to get rid of the Peace want to do, however, is get rid of foreign bases. What they really want to do, however, is get rid of their emperor (Haile Selassie), whom we are supporting."

To Wofford, who is currently president of the Old Westbury, Long Island, campus of the State University of New York, and soon will become president of Bryn Mawr College, the Peace Corps should try to help a country modernize as fast as possible and must promote change.

Swelled With Pride

Thousands of testimonials are readily available from young Americans who say, in effect, that overseas service in the Peace Corps "was the best two years of my life." Many of them had been foundering indecisively before they went abroad, and their corps experience guided them toward new careers.

Some swelled with pride, for example, at being asked, at 23, to plan a model town for Colombia or Ecuador or Peru. Some of them, however, were sorely disappointed later to find that they had to start at the very bottom in urban planning jobs when they returned home.

Most former volunteers don't seem to care much that they didn't change the world. What is important to them is that they could live in another culture, make a few good foreign friends, escape the draft and maybe — just maybe — be of a little service.

Betrayed

Others, however, they were unable to make much of a lasting impact, feel betrayed that no one told them at the outset that that was the way it would probably be.

Meanwhile, as Blatchford has indicated, many foreign governments are indeed becoming very picky about what volunteers they'll accept. To some extent they have grown wiser about their technical needs.

In many cases, however, considering Vietnam and the international hanky-panky in which the Central Intelligence Agency is rumored to be involved, foreign countries simply don't like to have a lot of young Americans running around their boondocks.

Out and In

Over the years, for one reason or another, the Peace Corps has been ousted from Cyprus, Indonesia, Mauritania, Pakistan, Gabon, Tanzania, Somalia and Libya. It was ousted from Ceylon in June, 1964, but returned three years later after a friendlier government had been installed there.

President Sekou Toure of Guinea ousted the corps in November, 1966. He invited it back two years later, however, because he discovered that the bus company and power plant in Conakry, his capital, couldn't be maintained properly without it.

When the monarchy in Libya was overthrown last year, 15 Peace Corps volunteers who were training to work there were shifted to training for Somalia. Then there was a coup d'etat in Somalia, too. So the group was broken up, and its members are now spread as far as the Philippines.